

The American Veteran
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Segment 2

JIM BENSON
Welcome back.

Homeless veterans: A difficult subject. Across the country tonight and every night, more than 200-thousand veterans may be homeless.

But the Department of Veterans Affairs is making a difference. In New Jersey, a new transitional housing facility, specifically built for women veterans, recently celebrated its grand opening. Nina Edwards has more.

NINA EDWARDS:
These days, Denise Brown and Cheryl Davis have plenty to laugh about. As the two roommates whip up breakfast for their household they think back to a time when mental illness and drugs ruled their daily lives.

DENISE BROWN:
Even though I wasn't doing the quote, unquote, things that you think an addict do, I was still an addict.

NINA EDWARDS:
Despite having three children, a husband, a college degree and a steady job, Denise was sucked into drug addiction. Until the day she heard the cry of her youngest son.

DENISE BROWN:
I was going to the store and I forgot my keys, so I turned to come back, and he didn't know, and he was looking up and tears was rolling' down his face and I'll never forget that, and he said, "God, I just want my Mommy back." And that just did it for me.

NINA EDWARDS:
For Denise's roommate, former Army captain Cheryl Davis, retirement meant shedding her uniform. But with it, she was also stripped of her identity, sending her into depression and eventually homelessness.

DENISE BROWN:
I didn't even know how to get myself out of the situation but I just considered myself to be a failure. I was in an apartment and I had to move out. I was fortunate enough to have some great friends.

DENISE BROWN: Today, I don't have to go to school. It's our Memorial Day.

NINA EDWARDS:

While the routes these two veterans took to get to this women's transitional facility are different, both know they wouldn't be on the path to recovery if it weren't for this home.

CHERYL DAVIS:

It's very possible that I could be living out of a car, or living in an abandoned building or in a cardboard box. It definitely was a possibility.

DENISE BROWN:

I would've been so overwhelmed, that's all I know. I would've been so overwhelmed. It's a cultural shock, It's like a cultural shock.

Gay Eisenhardt, Social Worker:

A lot of ladies, I'd say, they were ready to move beyond here, but not really ready to go back to their home life. So this makes a good way for them to sort of take a step, then work on some more issues and get ready to go back to their family or more independence.

NINA EDWARDS:

Addiction-free, independent living is the goal for both Denise and Cheryl, but they know they must work for it. Of the five female veterans who live here, all are required to do household chores, have an income and attend regular therapy sessions, but most importantly, they must maintain sobriety.

DENISE BROWN:

You know what? It's really hard work. But it's worth it, I'm worth it.

NINA EDWARDS:

Both women say the home lets them understand their past and helps them change their future.

CHERYL DAVIS: It gave me that strength to go for it. You know, maybe I won't be successful, but I know life doesn't end because that one thing doesn't work out.

NINA EDWARDS:

While outside these four walls, the ladies know old temptations will be their enemy, but it's inside these walls where they're arming themselves with the skills needed to fight back.

JIM BENSON:

Denise and Cheryl work as peer counselors for the V-A in New Jersey and say they are now living a purpose-driven life.

As we have learned, mental health is as important to our fighting men and women as their physical health. Since the beginning of Operations Enduring & Iraqi Freedom, social workers from V-A and D-o-D have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan to experience first hand, what our troops are facing.

During a recent joint social workers' conference, some previously deployed social workers shared their experiences abroad and how that helps them help returning service members. Michelle Spivak explains.

MICHELLE SPIVAK:

Army Captain Justin Cole is a social worker from Walter Reed Army Medical Center. He was deployed to Iraq as part of a combat stress control unit. A social worker on patrol.

JUSTIN COLE:

The new mission is to get social workers out there on the ground, out of the clinic and onto the ground. What that means is you throw your duffle bag on, your rucksack on, you get out there and march with them and experience what they experienced.

MICHELLE SPIVAK:

His unit was assigned to a combat company that caught Saddam Hussein in December of 2003, an experience he likes to talk about. But many troops see things they don't ever want to talk about. And that doesn't end when they go home.

JUSTIN COLE:

We dealt with combat stress, post-traumatic stress, other issues where being in the climate causes all sorts of things.

MICHELLE SPIVAK:

So social workers are sent to military transition points like Kuwait to get troops to just talk.

TRACEY JACKSON-WEAVER, CAPTAIN, USAF:

If you start talking to them early, I mean getting in with them early, to help decrease some of the stressors and the problems that occur later on.

MICHELLE SPIVAK:

Problems – the endless waiting to surviving a fire fight, from reestablishing family relationships to meeting children they have never seen – issues that weigh heavily on a soldier's mind. Sharing is the first big step in easing problems so service members can get back to the mission at hand.

JOVANNA WILSON, CAPTAIN, USAF:

They can identify with you, they feel that you identify with them, so they are more apt to share how they feel.

LINDA BUSH, LT COL, USAF:

It just always seems like they're in transition for one reason or another and that seems to be the majority of what I focus on with patients is how do you do that? How do you adjust?

MICHELLE SPIVAK:

In the field and back at home, outreach and prevention programs help soldiers and their families cope with the stresses of separation, and then being reunited. The VA is at the forefront of this by placing social workers on military bases – a part of the effective seamless transition program.

JILL MANSKE, VA'S DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL WORK:

Its been so effective that we're expanding and we're hoping that within the course of the next year to have VA social workers assigned to every single military treatment facility so that they can help seamlessly transition service members from the military to our VA facilities.

MICHELLE SPIVAK:

Returning service members and their families learn how TO be a family again with programs like family and parent support groups and clinical services like marriage and family counseling. But for those who need much more, social workers are on-site to recognize that.

JILL MANSKE:

They're there every single day, working with the treatment team, helping to identify those service members who aren't going to be able to return to their units and who are going to need a period of time for rehabilitation or who might be either medically separated or medically retired, helping them access health care in the VA system.

MICHELLE SPIVAK:

And that's reassuring for some recent vets. But for others there is a stigma associated with mental health issues: Fear of losing a job or a loved one. And that is where the VA steps in.

DAWN BRUMFIELD, SOCIAL WORKER:

We're able to help that person get referred to the VA nearest their home town and get their first appointments established so that their transition is smoother and they don't have so much difficulty entering the system.

MICHELLE SPIVAK:

These social workers believe a veteran's top priority should be letting the VA take care of them.

DAWN BRUMFIELD:

I want them to know that they have to take care of themselves because their military career is only this long (holding hands about six inches apart) when the VA will take care of them sometimes for the rest of their life.

LT COL BUSH:

It just seemed so right to be able to help folks and talk with folks and help them to see how they might be able to make their life just a little bit better.

JIM BENSON

If you would like to talk to a social worker or V-A counselor, please contact your nearest vet center.

You can find your nearest center by going to www.va.gov on the Internet, or calling 1-800-827-1000.

When we come back, we'll introduce you to the head of V-A's dental service, an Army Reservist who was wounded in Iraq.